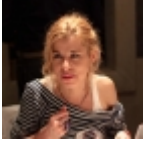
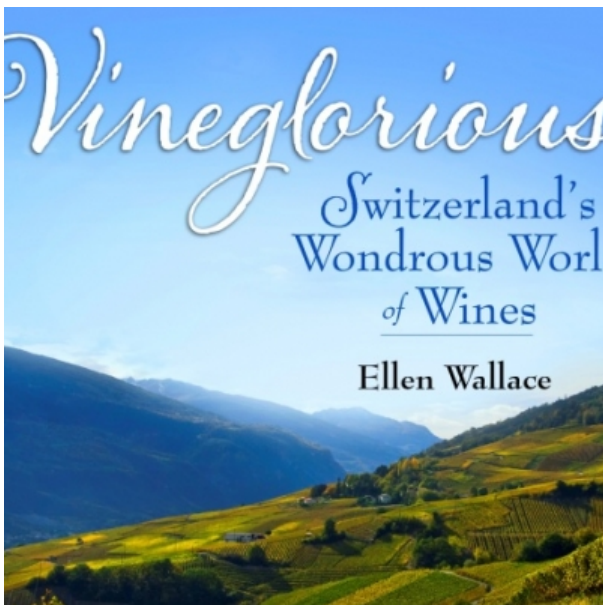


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**Written by**  
Tamlyn Currin  
5 Jan 2017

## Book reviews 2016 - places well known



**5 January 2017** We're republishing this group of Tam's wonderfully thorough wine-book reviews free today as part of our regular Throwback Thursday series.

**27 December 2016** For links to all of Tam's reviews of wine books published in 2016, see [this guide](#).

### **Port and the Douro**

Richard Mayson  
Infinite Ideas  
£30, \$40



The third edition of Richard Mayson's book came out in 2013 and Paul O'Doherty reviewed a

pre-publication copy [here](#) in 2012. This is a 2016 reprint, with, rather flatteringly, Paul's comment that it's 'a fantastic read from the get-go' on the front cover. I contacted publisher Infinite Ideas to find out what had changed and this was their reply: 'Richard has completely updated all the figures (he's been to more vintage port tastings since writing the 2013 edition and has included the new information in this edition). Chapter 5 contains a guide to vintages, which he's fully updated. He's also added 2012, 2013, 2014 and a first look at 2015. Also, all the producers and shippers are included in a comprehensive directory which reflects the structural changes the trade has undergone in recent years.'

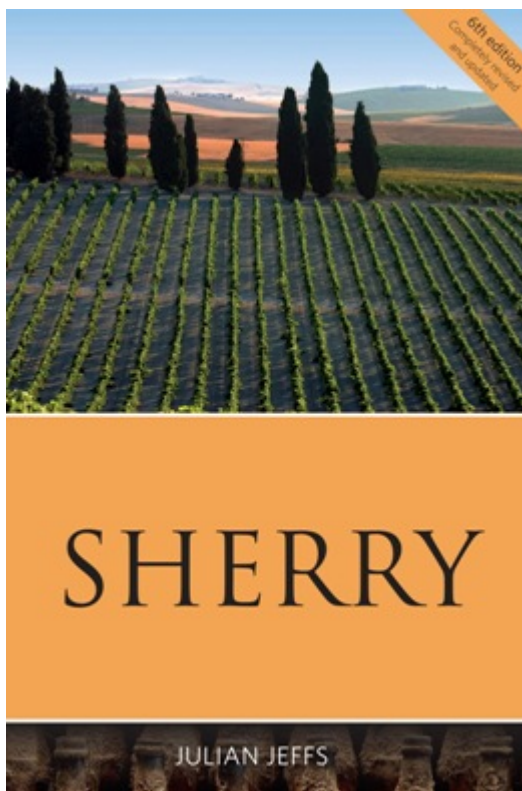
I am not going to write a full review. Paul's praise and synopsis, along with [Julia's endorsement](#), are recommendation enough. What I would add is that, with the most recent updates, if you're serious about port and Douro wine and don't have an earlier copy, it would be worth getting the most recent reprint.

## **Sherry**

Julian Jeffs

Infinite Ideas

£30, \$40

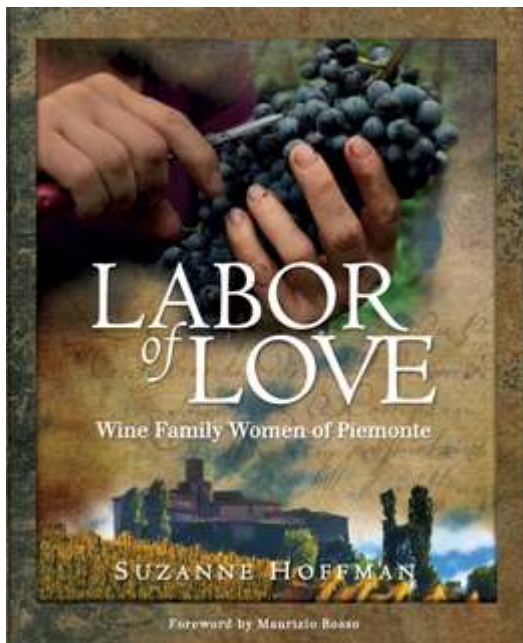


The sixth edition of The Classic Wine Library's *Sherry* was also reviewed by Paul O'Doherty. He gave a [brief summary](#) of the reprint that came out in 2015. The only difference between that and the 2016 reprint that Infinite Ideas have sent me is that Julian Jeffs has updated the tasting notes. This is a book worth having if you are studying sherry or have a strong interest in it, but if you have an earlier version of the sixth edition, there's no great need to rush out and buy this one.

## **Labor of Love**

*Wine Family Women of Piemonte*

Suzanne Hoffman  
Under Discovered Publishing  
\$55, €50



This was the second large hardback book to come my way for reviews. This is rich in colour, a feast of glorious photographs and illustrations on thick, sumptuous-feeling pages, and is laid out with a feeling of space and light - a visual temptress.

Suzanne Hoffman has chosen remarkably specific subject matter. It's not just about one, well-publicised region of Italy, it's about the women in that one region, and furthermore it's the women in the wine families of that one region. It's unusual for a wine book to have such a narrow focus, and the pitfalls are obvious, so it was with some trepidation that I opened these pages. Hoffman is American, from Louisiana. An attorney and journalist, she's lived in five different states and spent 20 years in Switzerland, and it was while in Switzerland that she discovered Piemonte, visiting more than 20 times over a 14-year period. Her indefatigable curiosity and a growing love for the wines and the region led to this book.

*Labor of Love* is in many ways a history of Piemonte. The overview, which includes a great map of the provinces and some of the DOCs of Piemonte, has an 'At a glance' page with timelines of the rulers and occupiers of Piemonte, and the first chapter of the book is about the remarkable Giulia Colbert Falletti, Marchesa of Barolo, 1785-1864. Through the stories of these women, we see a changing Piemonte as it is shaped and scarred through the First and Second World Wars, depression, poverty, the disastrous vintages and the sublime vintages, oenological revolutions, scandals and a growing international respect and demand for wine from this region.

Hoffman selects 22 wineries from Barolo, Barbaresco, Roero and Monferrato. With each, she describes her first trip to the winery, her first meeting with the woman (or women) involved. Clearly in almost awed admiration of these women, Hoffman then recounts the family past, often following the thread from great-grandmother to grandmother to mother to daughter, bringing ghosts back to life, and acknowledging, to the outer world, the tremendous work that these women have done - so much of it unseen.

Some of the stories are deeply moving. She tells of the staggering courage of Beatrice Rizzolio

of Cascina delle Rose as she stood between the guns of German soldiers and local teenage boys, telling them, 'They are young. Shoot me, I am an old lady' - this being the same woman who burst through the prison gates with a wagon-load of food for starving wartime prisoners, and ordered the gobsmacked German guards to feed them. She writes about the quiet depth of resilience and strength in Ornella Correggia, who picked up the pieces of their shattered lives when her young husband was killed in a freak accident in the vineyard, and she and her two young children carried on making wine and carrying his vision. She writes about ordinary women who struggle to juggle child rearing and homes with demanding jobs, and women who helped hide young partisan resistance fighters from the Nazis. It's a book full of memories.

It's a very personal story. I was surprised at how much of Hoffman's life and emotions are told in these pages. I wonder whether she identifies with them in some way. It's almost as much Suzanne Hoffman's journey through Piemonte as it is the stories of the women of Piemonte. Her family birthday celebrations, her friendships, her travels, her own roots, her love of cooking, her fears, her own memories and inspirations are woven inextricably into each chapter. Sometimes I wondered if perhaps there was too much of the author - I don't really want to know, for example, what she wore when she met Chiara Boschis, whatever the temperature might have been or whatever Chiara herself was wearing. I wasn't sure whether what she ate with her Mom on her first trip really added to the book in any way. But arguably she has gone behind closed doors, sat at kitchen tables over cups of coffee, befriended women, sifted with them through old family photos. A wine journalist sits at these tables and asks questions about the age of vines and lees stirring, listens to summaries of the vintage; Hoffman has asked questions about courting, love, babies and hardship, listened to stories about German occupation and tragic personal losses. She has spent hundreds of hours understanding the challenges of being a woman in the not-too-bygone days of male-powered Piemonte ('women who failed to produce male heirs were seen as weak. Even if a woman produced many girls, other women looked down on her as though she were childless') and the different, modern-day challenges of being a woman in Piemonte wine. Perhaps the only way to tell these tales is to walk right through them, side by side with the women one writes about. Perhaps her stories of getting lost in the rain and fog en route to wineries is part of what this book is about - the simple, gritty, everyday humanity behind great wines.

### ***Vineglorious!***

*Switzerland's Wondrous World of Wines*

Ellen Wallace

Ellen Books

CHF24, £19, \$23



Born in the US, but calling Switzerland home for the past 30 years, Ellen Wallace is a journalist and author who knows more about Swiss wine than most Anglo-Saxon wine writers. And largely because the Swiss drink all their wine and don't export it, for most of us Swiss wine is an enigma. And yet it's a wine region that ended up with four whole pages in the *World Atlas of Wine* (twice the number given to Croatia) and three pages in the *Oxford Companion to Wine* - this little country is far from insignificant.

*Vineglorious* is a beautiful little hardback book, about the size of a side plate, that starts with a clear, easy-to-read, colour-coded map of vine-growing Switzerland and a brief outline of the six official wine regions. Six chapters follow that, with slightly cryptic titles such as, 'Friends and enemies, saints and sinners', and 'Silence! Vines growing'.

You know you're in a whole new territory of wine book when the first chapter, 'A land of extremes', starts with a spectacular photograph of the Rhône glacier high in the Swiss Alps, in which three dessert wines made by Diego Mathier lie quietly in barrels, trekked up by mules, maturing under tons of ice. Then there is Lake Geneva, her 50-metre-deep canyons hiding shipwrecks and possibly hundreds of bottles of wine under tons of silt, and 1,000 bottles of Chasselas ageing underwater close to Montreux. Vineyards on tiny islands, by hidden lakes, clinging to edges of slopes steeper than black ski runs, fed by glacial waters along 2,000 km of handmade, often vertiginous water channels called *bisses*... this is wine in Switzerland. Breathtaking beauty (literally and figuratively), dizzying heights, crazy human endeavour.

Rather than a story, or a history, or a guide to Swiss wine, Wallace has collected a bijouterie of vignettes. These are not always directly connected to wine. Sometimes the link is spider-web thin - Wallace has an endearing way of wandering slightly off-piste, but she always loops back to wine with such easy grace that just as one is wondering how Sherlock or Charles the Bold have anything to do with Swiss wine, she connects the dots. The eclectic nature of the vignettes gives this book the sense of a chocolate box without a contents guide - each little tale is unexpected and unpredictable. For a rather rigidly ordered personality like mine, the book comes across as charming and mesmerising, but rather chaotic - like a child running after butterflies and popping them in the jar in whatever order they were caught. We hop from one thing to another with sometimes a link connecting the two, often not. At first I thought that this was going to be a problem but in fact, somehow, it works. Perhaps this is because the book is, more than anything, a celebration of Switzerland through the prism of her wine.

It's not, however, messily sentimental mush, and the butterfly jars themselves are neatly arranged. While the first chapter is about the extremes of making and growing wine in Switzerland, the second is about people and legends, criminals and heroes, connected to Swiss wine, including some amusing titbits. The third is about the 'Swiss patchwork grape madness'. This is a country where there are over 160 grape varieties and vineyards as small as 100 square metres. This chapter looks at common wines, unusual wines and varieties, and at the confusing naming of grapes (to summarise, as *Wine Grapes* readers will know: 'Humagne Rouge is really Italian Cornalin from Val d'Aosta. Swiss Cornalin is really Rouge du Pays from Valais. Humagne red and white aren't even close cousins.') The book whisks you through different styles of wines, and ancient grapes and styles that are making a comeback - oh to taste a glass of Completer!

On the subject of grapes, throughout the book is an alphabetically ordered roll call of 53 varieties that Wallace has set into the margins, punctuating the text with a little snapshot of each grape variety that has some significance in Switzerland, including a little bit of background on its Swiss form.

The last chapters cover terroir, viticulture and the environment, marketing and tourism (Thomas Cook of travel agent fame was a strict Baptist teetotaler - imagine what he would make of his customers now...), and more than a few stories devoted to the stringent Swiss customs and their intolerance of wine-duty shirkers. Transport, health and holiness also get a look in.

Wallace is a gifted photographer, and her superb photographs fill the pages, and the imagination, with colour and beauty. But she doesn't rely on them. Her words are equally vivid, capable of making my mouth almost water at her description of the unusual mutation of Gamay, Plant Robert, peppery black cherry in the mouth, that grows in Lavaux. And I could almost smell the resin, hazelnuts and dried fruits of Rèze, aged in its larchwood barrels.

Vineglorious is an Aladdin's cave. You will walk out of it with at least one golden nugget, and a yen to visit Switzerland.

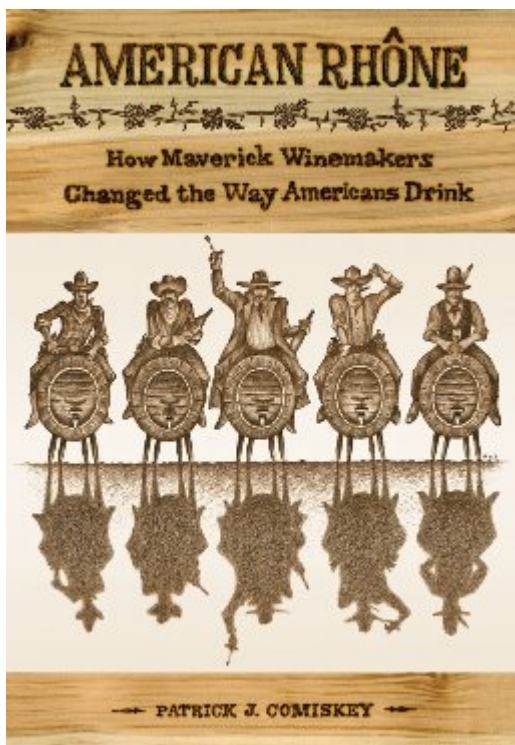
### **American Rhône**

*How Maverick Winemakers Changed the Way Americans Drink*

Patrick J Comiskey

University of California Press

£20, \$35



Patrick Comiskey is the senior contributor for *Wine & Spirits* magazine, a wine judge, wine educator, and one-time sommelier. He's written extensively for the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Food & Wine*, *Bon Appetit*, and *Decanter*, among others. This is his first book.

He started writing it back in 2010, just a couple of years after a Syrah epiphany on the patio of the restaurant Forty-Two Degrees in San Francisco, where he breathes in the aromas of Sean Thackrey's Orion. So perhaps the point of this book is best summed up in Comiskey's own words: 'there's something about your first sip of great Syrah that stands out... its wild, febrile magnetism, the heady disorientation in its inky, murky depths - it is a moment, in other words,

when you realise that your love of wine need not be a chocolate-and-vanilla experience. For this very reason, the American Rhône wine movement is more than just a movement; it's the moment when many of us realised that American wine did not have to be defined by Chardonnay, Cabernet and Merlot, that it could have breadth, dimensionality, an expanse of styles, and that it could be as quirky and singular and subversive as Orion.'

This book chronicles Comiskey's love affair with Syrah and the Rhône-born coterie of varieties and wine styles that come with it. It's also an anthem to the heroes, some pre-eminent, others barely a footnote. After reading a run of books written with British reserve, it was quite a gear change to open the pages of a book written with so much fervour and frank emotion. The pages are filled with colour and drama. Comiskey has an immense gift for story - he writes with pace, energy, sharpness, a reverence for fact but is equally comfortable with infusing it with his own opinions. He has a talent for painting a picture in three dimensions. His zeal is infectious, mesmerising even, and *American Rhône* is impossible to put down.

There are six parts: Preludes and antecedents, Pioneers and players, Artists and iconoclasts, The movement starts to move, Boomtime, and Irrational exuberance. Very loosely, the book is arranged chronologically, starting in the sixties and seventies with a vivid depiction of the social evolution of the California wine scene. Here he lays the cornerstone of the Rhône movement: 'the axis of Olney, Tempier, Lynch and Waters'. Comiskey convincingly advocates the seminal role that hippy-activist-cum-chef Alice Waters, musician-bagmaker-cum-wine-merchant Kermit Lynch, painter-writer-cum-Provence-retreat-provider Richard Olney and the iconic Domaine Tempier played in planting the seeds. The strong relationships between these four, and the ripple effects, play out right through the book.

The second chapter is really the only one that is more about places and grapes than about people. It starts by describing the Rhône river and her surrounds, a backdrop to the drama he is about to narrate. He follows this with a description of the Rhône varieties that form the pillars of what he refers to as the 'Rhône pantheon' (a description repeated almost to the point of overuse). The ode to Syrah (and there is no other word for it) begins with, 'American Syrah remains the tent pole of the Rhône pantheon', and halfway through, he almost breaks out into song as he writes, 'And what attributes!'. It's totally unBritish, I thought, as I read on. But it is irresistible. It's also packed with the results of his years of research. For each variety he describes its origins and history, characteristics (on French soil and American soil), strengths and weaknesses in both countries, how much is grown in the US, where it's planted, who plants it, who makes wine from it, what role it plays in blends.

Thereafter, the book meanders, through time, through lives, through events and philosophies. There is a bit of backward and forward movement, occasionally causing enough confusion to have me leafing backward and forward to work out what happened first and, as I've already seen in several books reviewed this year, it's very easy to repeat oneself when writing about complicated history, where strands divert, run in parallel, and then knot up again. Several stories appeared more than once, on occasion chunks of text appeared to be almost identical. This doesn't detract enormously from the narrative but suggests editing could have been tighter.

The depth and breadth of research that Comiskey has undertaken for this book is laudable. He's chased so many tiny threads of stories, starting from 180 years ago, before the Civil War, hunting down anyone and everyone who may or may not have brought a Rhône cutting from France, who planted them, who studied them, who made wine from them. He devotes a whole chapter, rightly, to the astounding confusion of Petite Sirah for Syrah and the heroine grape

geneticist Carole Meredith who finally established the truth. He writes a grim chapter on Prohibition - not that wine lovers don't already appreciate how destructive it was and how its impact was felt across the world, not least on the universities studying viticulture and plant science whose loss was a different sort: of intellect, knowledge, raw materials, innovation, creativity, confidence, precious data and experience.

From there, American Rhône almost becomes like a detective novel - with every story giving new clues in answer to the questions, why, and how? And these clues lie in the people portraits that Comiskey paints, with almost effortless ease - a kind of Chappatte meets Van Gogh talent for observing and capturing personality with wit and ruthless honesty, and yet with a touch of awe. It's a roll call of the Rhône greats, but he goes much much further than that. He's thrown a spotlight on the work of many men (and a couple of women) who made massive contributions, quietly, in the background, with dedication. His stories of these people are peppered with humour and serendipity (read the one about Mat Garretson phoning John Alban via a modem line linked to an Edna Valley weather station in the middle of his vineyard, as well as the somewhat eyebrow-raising stories of the 'Samsonite clones'). He manages, archaeologist-like, to brush away the dirt of time and reveal the intricate cobweb of connections and coincidences that linked so many people together to form this movement.

The book ends on a rather sombre note. 'The story of its fall may be every bit as compelling as the story of its rise...' he writes as he charts how American Rhône wines, Syrah in particular, have fallen prey to mass marketing and cheap, sweet imitations. 'It's hard to believe', he ventures, 'but Syrah was wending its way to being boring' and he tries to understand why. But his last paragraph is full of hope, and a sense that perhaps out of the revolution, something more permanent has been born.

When I read this book, my first thought was that there was no need to write a review. I should just write, 'Buy it. Read it.' But then I thought that to be even-handed, as I have tried to be with all the books, I should include the reasons why I think it's worth reading and where the faults lie. I've done the former. As for the latter, he does have favourite words, which he tends to use to the point of threadbare: ebullient, pantheon, peripatetic, and empirical come to mind. Several passages are taken almost directly from articles that he has previously written for various publications - not a crime, but just caveat emptor for those who read Comiskey regularly. And my little pet gripe: the notes are at the end of the book rather than at the foot of the page. One has to keep flipping back and forth - very annoying.

Patrick Comiskey is an outstanding writer, his style something of a cross between Terry Theise and Andrew Jefford. He loves words. That was evident on every page. I kept reading quotes out to anyone who walked past my desk. He also has a real heart for a story, and so I'll just repeat myself: ignore this review. Buy the book. Read the book.